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THE ENDURING LEGACY

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By Joseph Lelyveld

"YOUNG BRONZE GOD OF WAR." JOHN DENTON FIRST HEARD that phrase in harangues and pep talks when he was going through officers' training as a marine. It resurfaced in his mind a generation later at a sun-dappled Fourth of July family picnic. What brought it back was an encounter there with a young soldier who seemed as eager for action as Denton himself had been when he took command of his first platoon in Bravo Company, Seventh Engineer Battalion, at Danang, South Vietnam, in 1966.

Denton, now an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, hadn't realized that soldiers like that were still being turned out. Trying to express how moved and transfixed he felt when he saw the young man, Denton described a vision: "He was 21, if that, and he took me right back to what I was. He was ready, and he was going to do it, almost to the point of saying, 'I sure hope they've got a war going someplace.' It made me feel good, but at the same time I wanted to go over and put my arm around him and say, 'Hey, have you got about five minutes? I want to tell you a few things.' "

Denton never had that conversation. If he had spoken, he would have talked, he said, about the responsibilities rather than the glory of command, about the strength a leader derives from his men, about devotion to them as an element of valor.

Instead, this F.B.I. man was toiling late in the den over his garage in Knoxville, Tenn., pouring it all into a novel — not about the country called Vietnam, or the questions represented by the war, or what happened to the veterans when they returned to an ungrateful, even hostile, nation. The country and questions and aftermath were all incidental. What he needed to explore was the nature of the camaraderie of men at war, almost to the exclusion of these other matters.

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In the 60's, proponents of intervention used to argue somewhat wanly that we had to engage the realities of a complicated world; the opponents brandished moral principles and brushed aside complexity. In the 80's, I was beginning to conclude, it is just the opposite. But Daniel Ellsberg, a veteran of both sides, didn't fit into my paradigm. He had known Vietnam too well to be simplistic then and he was not inclined to waffle now. Over herbal tea in his hillside study on the outskirts of Berkeley, where tank on issues of war and peace, Ellsberg read to me a passage from one of his official reports from Vietnam that he had published in 1972 without apologies. The Communists, he had predicted, would introduce "forced-draft industrialization under totalitarian controls, capitalized by exploitation of the peasants and preceded by a blood bath to destroy or terrorize potential opposition."

"I did not take naïve positions," he says, marking the passage. "There is a tendency now to stereotype the entire antiwar movement as pro-Hanoi. A stab-in-the-back legend is growing up."

Ellsberg argues that there is a peace movement in place now that is more broadly based, more knowledgeable about techniques of nonviolent protest and more disciplined than the movements of the 60's. It has shown itself in the campaign for a nuclear freeze. It will show itself again, he says, as the conflicts in Central America widen. The Central Intelligence Agency and the Pentagon are also better prepared, he contends. They have built airfields, made their logistical arrangements, sealed borders and eliminated the possibility of sanctuaries before running the risk of American casualties; they are also ready, he says, to limit television and press coverage. "But if you think all we need is censorship, more air power and tougher police," Ellsberg says, "look at Russia in Afghanistan or Vietnam in Cambodia."

Ten years later, we are talking about Vietnam again, but often as an analogy. What we really want to know is what we would do the next time. The question is put two ways. Positively: Have we regained our national will and purpose? Negatively: Are we about to tear ourselves apart all over again? The two concerns, it may be noted, are both self-regarding. They are also not mutually exclusive, as The Times poll shows.

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